
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/696813)

PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Johns Hopkins University Press at https://muse.jhu.edu/article/696813. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

**University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research**

**General rights**

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/pure/user-guides/explore-bristol-research/ebr-terms/
A Singular Case: Love and Trauma in Carmen Laforet’s *La isla y los demonios* (1952).

For as the botanist plucks one single flower from the endless abundance of the plant world and then analyses it so as to demonstrate to us the nature of the plant in general, so the poet selects a single scene, indeed sometimes no more than a single mood or sensation, from the endless confusion of ceaselessly active human life, in order to show us what the life and nature of man is.1

Pathology has always done us the service of making discernible by isolation and exaggeration conditions which would remain concealed in a normal state.2

Both Schopenhauer and Freud’s observations arise from their knowledge and experience of the phenomenon of singularity: the poet’s capacity to pursue a general truth through the particularity of language, and the therapist’s recognition of how the individual traits of a human psyche perpetually illuminate our understanding of human existence. Schopenhauer noted art’s capacity to make ‘one single case stand[s] for thousands’ in which the ‘careful and particular delineation of the individual is the revelation of the Idea of the genus to which it belongs’.3 Thus Schopenhauer and Freud suggest that to speak of singularity always already entails a connection to a wider system or set of experiences. Through literature, most notably the novel, writers forge their creative endeavours from an isolated event in order to give expression to ‘what the life and nature of man is’ and thus from singularity, a deeper connection to a wider genus of experience is unveiled. We may conceive of literature then as an ongoing metonymic process with one singular case, often an extraordinary one, disclosing a more widespread phenomenon or set of experiences that had yet to be articulated. Therein lies the value of literature in supporting our understanding of the human psyche as it unfolds through emotional experiences, culture and history.

This article addresses the phenomenon of singularity with reference to Carmen Laforet’s second novel, *La isla y los demonios* (1952).4 Published
seven years after her famous first novel Nada (1945), critical interpretations of La isla have failed to grasp its wider significance, primarily due to its resistance to socio-historic interpretations. Although the Spanish civil war serves as a distant backdrop to the events of the novel, Laforet’s central preoccupation is to examine the impact of love upon the young female protagonist Marta Camino, whose surname means road or journey. In this regard, La isla may be designated an important feminist novel, even though Laforet refuted her connections with any feminist ideological positions. Marta’s experience of falling in love with Pablo, an artist several years her senior, constitutes the ‘demonios’ or human passions of the title which function to transform her behaviour and to diminish temporarily her concept of self-agency. Set on the island of Gran Canaria, Marta also projects her sublimated sexual desire onto one of the mythical Guanche gods Alcorah, who serves as both a symbolic substitute father figure and idealized interlocutor. La isla interrogates the traditional Catholic concept of abnegation, prevalent in Franco’s Spain, and reveals another side to female sexuality. Although Marta and Pablo’s relationship is devoid of sexual intimacy, Marta also experiences a strong physical attraction to a young soldier, Sixto, although their relationship also remains un consummated. Despite the stringency of the censorship laws in Spain at the time, La isla provides a less than subtle critique of existing expectations of women’s behaviour and highlights the struggles that women faced in repressing their natural libidinal desires within a repressive culture. Yet the singularity of La isla can be found not simply in its critique of Francoist society and its ideological stance towards women’s sexual behaviour; the novel provides a deeper critique of the state of being in love and posits this condition as a form of emotional trauma in itself, rather than one of fulfilment and pleasure. On one level, La isla provides a sustained critique of the benefits of love which, as a cultural universal, are over determined. Love is given, sought, cherished and, if emotional attachments fail, the longing to be loved takes shape across numerous iterations. Yet love, as La isla suggests, also functions to produce a negative impact on the human psyche. Indeed, love as a form of illness has been widely discussed and represented from classical literature to the present day. Robert Burton’s famous Anatomy of Melancholia (1621) notes the relationship between love-sickness and the depressive state of melancholy. Freud discussed how the person in love becomes psychically damaged due to the object of desire consuming the ego of the lover and ultimately leading to self-injury. Building upon the idea of love as a form of emotional injury, Dorothy Lennov coined the term ‘limerence’ in her 1979 study Love and Limerence. Lennov thus conceptualizes what feminists
such as Karen Horney and Simone de Beauvoir had already noted with reference to the negative impact of love on women’s self-identity and psychological independence. Similarly, the work of Jessica Benjamin and Wendy Langford provides detailed analytical discussions of the negative impact of love on relationships; reiterating Freud, Langford observes how the condition of being in love involves a massive cathexis whereby excessive psychic investment in the beloved results in the person in love becoming ‘gripped by compulsions which they do not understand.’

Such is the case for the young protagonist of *La isla*, yet the singularity of Laforet’s second novel develops from its treatment of a specific response to love as it occurs within the psyche of an already traumatized subject. Laforet’s representation of love provides an important insight into both the nefarious consequences of love both on women’s psychology, but also the more specific case of the impact of love upon individuals who have already undergone a major life trauma. In Marta’s case, she has experienced the death of her father; her mother, who remains in a catatonic state in an upstairs room in the family home, functions as a symbol of absent maternal love. The protagonist’s emotional deprivation is further compounded by a tyrannical step-brother, whose mentally unstable wife Pino is jealous of Marta’s position within the family and her husband’s obsession with his step-mother. Throughout *La isla*, Laforet is less concerned with representing the traumatic emotional sequelae of a failed relationship and more intent upon examining Marta’s psyche as it undergoes further traumatic distortion due to the experience of love.

When Marta meets Pablo, who has travelled to the island with members of her wider family to escape the Spanish civil war, her immediate psychic investment in Pablo is alarming and it signals more than a merely childish obsession with a worldly, older man. Deeper unmet psychological needs are at work due to the loss of love from both of her parents. The intensity of Marta’s cathexis reveals an unstable ego and, thus, a fragile self-construct; love functions to exacerbate an already damaged psyche. Under the spell of her own imagination, Marta transforms Pablo into another idealized god alongside the mythical gods of her island. Believing that love can displace the emotional suffering sustained through an absence of parental love, Marta in fact succumbs to what Langford describes as ‘the deepest levels of her feminine conditioning’ as she focuses ‘her energies directly upon the hopeless task of securing his recognition and “accepting” her status as object’. This loss of self in the male other leads to the erosion of Marta’s true self, to borrow D. W. Winnicott’s now familiar term. Yet Marta’s emotional volatility leads to further psychic disorder.
and her love for Pablo becomes a reiteration of an unconscious, psychic longing for the absent caregivers. Thus, trauma breeds trauma and Marta’s sense of self-agency is depleted as she shapes Pablo into an idealised father-cum-saviour figure. As Langford observes, the more a woman loses herself in the male other ‘the more the heroine becomes subject to ‘paternal’ governance’. Marta seeks to merge with her own projected idea of Pablo as a way of alleviating her suffering, yet by doing so, her deluded state is merely a repetition of the desire to retrace her emotional path back to the primary care givers. Here, Langford proves instructive again:

Love may be traced back through many repetitions, but its intense and crucial emotions of fear, of anxiety, of excitement, of bliss are ultimately those of the tiny infant who, apprehending its own separate and imperfect existence in a constantly changing and frustrating world, attempts to escape from itself through identification with powerful – and in the child’s fantasy, perfect – parent figures.

Bearing Langford’s comments in mind, the imprint of love on Marta’s already damaged psyche creates a deeper longing that soon reveals itself to be less about Pablo and is situated more plausibly in her unconscious desire for a state of merger with an Other. A real, physical union with the man himself is not Marta’s object. Her longing is to be subsumed within love, as the following quotation suggests: ‘Volvió a sentir el amor de Pablo llenándola como el agua a un estanque, rebosándola, oprimiéndola.’ Here Laforet also provides readers with an insight into the concept of female masochism, a subject discussed by both Freud and Horney. Contrary to Freud, Horney relates how social and cultural influences, and not simply their biological sex, impacted upon the formation of women’s psychologies:

The problem of feminine masochism cannot be related to factors inherent in the anatomical-psychic characteristics of woman alone, but must be considered as importantly conditioned by the culture-complex or social organization in which the particular masochistic woman has developed.

On this view, a woman enacts her own suffering unconsciously as a result of cultural deformation. Thus, cultural expectations of how women should love function as the traumatic root of their suffering and psychological oppressions. As Marcia Westkott observes, ‘for Horney neurosis is the
consequence of cultural contradictions and constricting expectations that block the development of a whole self.’ We might, therefore, be persuaded to state that Laforet’s intention throughout La isla was to illustrate the impact of a conservative, patriarchal ideology upon women’s capacity to envisage an identity for themselves beyond that of the narrowly defined cultural models laid down by the Franco regime. Yet this interpretation provides us with only a limited insight into the psyche of Laforet’s protagonist in La isla. Laforet’s treatment of the female subject in love can indeed be read through the lens of societal trauma since female autonomy was not recognized in Franco’s Spain and women were defined only through their relationship to a male Other such as their father, brother or husband, or through their identification with God if they had taken a position within a religious order. Marta’s frequent defiance of cultural norms singles her out as an archetypal ‘chica rara’ who, apart from her infatuation with Pablo, challenges cultural mores. However, the singularity of La isla resides in a wider understanding of the factors that influence individual psychology and cannot be contained solely within the historical parameters of Francoism and its patriarchal superstructure. Marta’s loves fails to equate with what might be deemed love under more normal historical and cultural conditions, thus illustrating Laforet’s relevance beyond the immediate context of Franco’s Spain. As has already been suggested, Marta’s love is based on a desire for the first form of love experienced by the child towards the parent which, arguably, can only be reconstituted in the adult child’s relationship with its offspring. At one point Marta articulates this very concept: ‘Nunca, pensaba, podría querer a ninguna otra persona de esta manera. No es posible que un sentimiento tan grande, sin base alguna de realidad, se dé dos veces en la vida.’ Prone to fantasy, Marta succumbs to projecting her desires onto her external world, to the point of seeking to merge with her environment, a psychological reaction which has its origins in her unconscious desire to reunite with the lost parent(s) and is a manifestation of her ongoing psychological trauma arising from unresolved grief over the absence of a primary love object. This is illustrated in the novel when Marta visits Pablo’s residence and, on not finding him in his room, she sits in it alone and experiences as sense of dissolution of time, place and her sense of self: ‘La atmósfera de la habitación la llenaba, la calmaba toda. Perdía la noción del tiempo.’ Stimulated by her desire for intimacy, Marta experiences Pablo’s presence vicariously through the objects in this room in a similar manner to spiritual communion with God through religious iconography. Marta even compares her state of mind to that of being in church: ‘tenía el ánimo lleno de fervor, como si estuviera en una.
Thus, it is a longing for a feeling of absorption, frequently associated with transcendence and the desire for spiritual relief, that Marta seeks rather than a romantic relationship with Pablo. Evidence of Marta’s projection of her own unconscious needs blinds her to a realistic assessment of Pablo’s life experiences and motivations. She wishes to play the part of his loyal companion, a person with whom he can assuage his loneliness: ‘Si ella de alguna manera pudiese ayudarle a no estar solo, se consideraría muy feliz de haber nacido y crecido en la isla para esperarle.’ Yet her desire to rescue Pablo from his predicament is a redirection of her unconscious desire to save herself, from her culture and family circumstances, but primarily from her own self-willed masochistic behaviour and denial of emotional deficits.

The question to examine now is how Laforet explores Marta’s journey towards greater self-awareness and the methods through which she attempts to liberate herself from her traumatised love for Pablo. One of the most important features of La isla arises from the shift that occurs in Marta’s subject position from a passive onlooker as the demonics or uncontrolled impulses associated with love overwhelm her to an active agent who transcends her illusions and, seemingly, moves forward on a new path towards self-directed goals. The central preoccupation of Laforet’s fiction more generally is the individual’s search for psychological freedom based on the trope of flight from one set of restricting conditions, to the pursuit of a more liberating mode of existence. Each of her novels is structured around a series of psychological movements that attempt to liberate the protagonists from a deeper suffering which has its roots in the absence of the loss of a parent, yet readers are left to wonder whether an end point to suffering is ever found since Laforet’s narratives are marked by ambiguity and possess an open-ended structure. Vacillation is integral to the process of change as the protagonists often move both towards and away from debilitating circumstances in their pursuit of self-realization and an end to emotional disturbances. The repeated pattern in each novel consists of a journey to encounter a psychic state of rest, albeit a temporary one.

In the case of Marta in La isla, she undergoes a process of change and seeks to alter her circumstances as a means of alleviating her traumatized emotional state. This arises largely due to Pablo distancing himself from their friendship and him reminding her that her behaviour toward him remains unacceptable within the strict moral parameters of their society. Marta’s more rational self reprimands her for her conduct and reminds her to: ‘Acostumbrarte a la idea de que no tienes que perseguir a quien te rechaza… De ninguna manera.’ The traumatic emotions associated
with rejection by the loved one stimulate the emergence of a powerful inner voice that functions as a corrective to the less rational reasoning of the woman in love. Throughout the narrative, frequent references are made to ‘dos Martas’ which, within her traumatised psyche consists of divided self-concepts. Alongside her romantically enmeshed self grows a self-reflecting voice, representing Marta’s nascent understanding of her freedom of the will and self-agency. The latter acts as a healthy corrective to the voice of los demonios or human passions and, on occasions, it acts as a rational counter-balance to her unruly emotions and over-active imagination. Her emotional cathexis in Pablo diminishes as Marta becomes gradually aware of her emotional enslavement to the male Other. From a conceptual viewpoint, Langford proves useful in articulating Marta’s process of awakening to reason:

"love does not bring lasting happiness. ...love in itself cannot develop our potential, heal our wounds or set us free. It can, however, hold us hostage to oppressive forces, lock us ever more securely within the confines of a stunted selfhood, and twist our desire for freedom into a neurotic and destructive craving."29

Love fails to nurture Marta’s traumatised psyche and instead turns into ‘a neurotic and destructive craving.’

As a counterweight to Marta’s yearning for love, Laforet sets out to explore alternatives to love as a mode of healing psychological trauma through two distinct modes: creative writing and reason. Writing as an outlet or working through of trauma is well documented within the literature on psychoanalysis and within the therapeutic practice of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. In the case of Laforet herself, writing was a means of expressing her own unconscious pain through her protagonists’ attempts to resolve their personal suffering yet her fiction also suggests that an end to psychological trauma is not encountered through the craft of literature. Although compelled to write, this compulsion was in itself traumatic, and Laforet finally opted for a life of quiet, detached contemplation, rather than the creation of literature. The young protagonist of La isla also suffers from a ‘sarampión literario’ or literary measles and she initially encounters a sense of well-being through writing: ‘El deseo de escribir se le hizo tan fuerte que la envolvió en una ola cálida de entusiasmo,’ suggesting once again her tendency to pursue states that result in a sensation of emotional merger with an object or phenomenon function as an antidote to suffering.30 Initially, creative
serves functions as an escape from the emotional barrenness of Marta’s home environment but *La isla* suggests that Marta changes her attitude towards writing by the end of the novel; before leaving the island, she gathers her manuscripts together and burns them in a small pyre by the side of a road. Although there is no indication that Marta will abandon writing completely, something else has, for the time being, taken its place and this is ‘realidad’ or, more concretely, the development of the other more rational Marta who emerges from her deluded state of being in love. The mythical stories of the island’s history, as well as her own fantasised concept of ideal love – another fictional story – dissolve as the young Marta matures into personhood. As she acts on her desire to leave the island under her own initiative, fantasy takes a back seat and her traumatised self impinges less on her capacity to act freely. Nonetheless, Marta’s flights into the imaginary and her romantic idealisation of Pablo have a paradoxical function as they allow for the necessary process of disillusionment that is essential for self-growth and agency.31 Love and fantasy lead Marta back to reality and to her primary objective: to leave the island and establish a life for herself away from the control of her step brother and her wider family trauma. Thus, *La isla* suggests that freedom from trauma arises through self-directed action, rather than the search for merger through love and the absorption within the creative act.

Marta gains an insight into the relationship between agency and freedom through her observation of women at work while she is on one of her regular perambulations around the city. The image of working women stimulates her to experience a moment of self-realisation as she comprehends the nature of her fortunate class position within her society and her capacity to live a different life to the working women of the island: ‘La vida de la plaza había empezado. Campesinas acababan de llegar en los coches de hora, sirvientas madrugadoras movian por allí. Ella las miraba. A veces pensaba: “Soy yo, yo, Marta Camino, quien estoy libre en este día.”’32

Neither Marta’s obsessional love for Pablo, nor the act of creation enables Marta to feel herself to be ‘free on this day’ yet she indicates a nascent awareness of her privileged subject position due to her class through watching the women who are tied to their daily tasks. Laforet’s image of women engaged in the rhythms of quotidian life and their role in the domestic economy may also serve as a commentary on the relationships between women and work which forms an undercurrent throughout Laforet’s fiction. Middle-class women in Franco’s Spain were not expected to work and therefore over invested in their roles as wives, mothers and homemakers.
The expectation placed upon women to find contentment within the domain of love and marriage lays the ground for female neurosis and sublimated anger and sexual frustration. Through subtle critique, Laforet’s fiction posits the view that, for the bourgeois woman, psychological suffering is, in part, rooted in her economic enslavement to her husband, father or another male member of the family. Laforet’s fiction suggests repeatedly that the structure of the bourgeois family carries within it the source of women’s psychological trauma due to the power relationships upon which it is based. Langford’s comments reinforce the view that the socially constructed ideal of a family unit can function as a prison house:

Love does not create a private domain in which humanity thrives apart from a competitive and alienating public world; on the contrary, life ‘within the refuge’ is itself determined by the exercise of power, and love in itself helps to underpin an inhumane and unequal society.

*La isla* situates Marta on a journey away from the refuge of love, yet it is not clear whether Marta will find fulfilment through work and economic freedom, despite her decision to leave the island to live in mainland Spain. She is separated from the realm of work due to her class and thus feels herself separate from the women she observes in the marketplace, yet she refuses to adopt the role of an obedient, middle-class wife. Marta’s uncertainty about her future is assuaged by her recognition of the steadying influence of reason rather than love and writing as the source that must guide her towards any future goal. An increasing sense of ‘realidad’, an objective, self-reflecting stance, gradually prevails over Marta’s more childish, romantic impulses towards Pablo. Laforet configures an epiphanic moment in the novel in which both time and space are transcended and a dialogue between patriarchy, sexual biology, nature and reason occur. On a metaphorical level, readers enter into the more fluid domain of Marta’s unconscious and observe the processes through which it has been shaped through culture and the parallel resistances that have grown up as a rejection of feminised role models. Laforet projects Marta’s unconscious onto an ancient dragon tree, against which she is leaning in one of the city’s parks in a moment of quiet contemplation following a failed encounter with Pablo. The tree, a symbol of her wiser, older self, or ancient mother archetype, calls her to direct herself towards reality – ‘Está pidiendo realidad’ – and prophetically alerts her to her future discovery of Pablo and her aunt Hones kissing in a garden at night. The reality of her reproductive future is also flashed in front of her mind as
a patriarchal voice is interwoven into her thoughts. It reminds her of her limited subject position in her society and the life that awaits her: ‘La vida para una mujer es amor y realidad. Amor, realidad, palpitación de la sangre. [...] Tienes dentro de ti semillas de muchos hijos que han de nacer.’ The absence of women’s control over their own reproduction within the early decades of the Franco regime is made manifest in this quotation yet Marta rejects the patriarchal voice that alludes to her sexually pre-determined role as wife and mother. Marta reorients her life in defiance of expectations of her gender. The trope of flight from love, the island and from cultural role models suggests that Marta has embraced freedom of the will and acquired the courage to take risks: ‘Una persona que se fuga debe saber resolver sus propios asuntos y tiene que arriesgarse...’. Through Marta’s awakening to reason it appears that she has acquired the strength to reject the nefarious consequences of love and has transformed herself into what Westkott describes in her discussion of Horney’s work as:

the female hero [who] shatters the internal form of her victimization. External shoulds are driven from their internal stronghold, and conscious choice rather than fearful compliance informs her actions. She experiences, finally, the extraordinary power of her ordinary real self.

By the end of La isla Marta certainly appears to have adopted the role of the female hero, replacing Pablo with self-love which, according to Langford, is in fact the misplaced object of romantic or obsessional love: ‘we must not forget that worship and adoration of the beloved are aimed ultimately at the self.’ However, although Marta’s actions are self-seeking and fulfil her desire to leave the island it is not clear whether the replacement of traumatic love with reason or ‘realidad’ functions to heal her traumatic past. Underlying both the ‘demonios’ of love and her pursuit of reason still lie the protagonist’s unresolved trauma of absent parental love. Despite her transcendence of her love for Pablo, by placing her faith in reason Marta still fails to address the well-spring of her original desire for merger with an Other. Unwittingly, Laforet supplements the flight to love with the flight to reason, skipping the important process of critical self-analysis and encountering the unconscious processes that reside behind Marta’s actions. While reason acts as an effective tool with which to facilitate a new stage of Marta’s life, La isla does not suggest that her original trauma has been addressed.

Laforet’s subsequent novels are all based around the pursuit of relief from suffering and suggest an ongoing search for psychological wholeness in response to an earlier childhood trauma, in each case, the
loss of one or both parents. It is Laforet’s final novel, Al volver la esquina, published a few months after her death, that reveals the actions required to desist from the repeated search for love as a means of assuaging ongoing psychological trauma, thus exacerbating the original traumatic loss of the parent. It is in this novel that the protagonist submits himself to psychoanalysis in a bid to examine the underlying motivations for his behaviour, most notably his pursuit of love as a mode of alleviating his ongoing ontological and emotional despair, illustrating a similar pattern to Marta’s obsessional and self-damaging love for Pablo. If we read Laforet’s novels as a continuum in which the origins of the end to psychological suffering forms the unconscious substrata of her writing, then it proves legitimate to suggest that reason will not provide the salve to Marta’s desire for self-fulfilment. Thus, Marta’s first steps towards self-love remain tentative since she has failed to examine the origin of her despair due to a limited awareness of her unconscious motivations. As Westkott avers: ‘The therapeutic journey is the release from dictates of pride and recovery of the real self as the locus of choice.’

Yet it is not the therapeutic journey that Marta undertakes but a journey away from the island which, arguably, represents another flight from the self. If love further compounds Marta’s trauma, La isla also suggests that fleeing the island constitutes another defensive strategy against deeper self-revelation. Flight forms, according to Horney’s discussion of defensive strategies within the individual, a ‘pseudo solution’ which further increases ‘the disturbance in … relations with others’ and ‘means that a real solution becomes less and less attainable.’

Marta’s love for Pablo serves not as a warning against the perils of limerence as such and the risk to self-annihilation through love, but as a failure to face a deeper, unconscious discordance. Marta’s camino or path remains subject to the vagaries of her defensive strategies, and although love may have been cleared from her onward journey, La isla suggests that reason may only act as a temporary guide. ‘Realidad’ is not the reverse side of the coin to love. As Horney notes, the individual who is subject to neurotic obsession, has still yet to see ‘the reverse side of the medal’ upon which ‘the incapacitating effects of his neurotic drives and conflicts’ bear their imprint.

The singularity of La isla cannot be found in a simplistic interpretation of Marta’s switch from traumatic love for Pablo to a new-found faith in reason and personal courage. There is no indication by the end of the novel that Marta has achieved a stable ego structure, although her rejection of idealized love indicates that she is becoming a more
active agent in her life choices and in the formation of her identity. Laforet’s second novel offers a complex meditation on the impact of love on an already traumatised psyche and it is from this singular case that readers gain insights into the complex nature of the relationship between love and trauma. Freud, when perplexed by his own lack of scientific clarity on a feature of psychoanalytical inquiry, skilfully skirted around the matter of ambiguity by telling his readers to ‘turn to the poets’ and future scientific discoveries for ‘deeper and more coherent information.’

Freud faced his limitations as a scientist by acknowledging that within the realm of creativity, poets and writers possessed the power to disclose examples of human psychology that furthered our understanding of the human mind and behaviour better than analytical observations. It is, as Schopenhauer and Freud recognised, often the singular case created by the poet or, in the case of Laforet, novelist, that stands in metonymically, for a wider genus. La isla’s singularity sheds light on the broader and infinitely complex relationship between love and trauma and the associated dangers of suggesting that love functions as a potential cure for ingrained traumatic suffering that has resulted from past life events.

Notes

3. Schopenhauer, 158-159.
4. Carmen Laforet (1921-2004) was one of the most important writers to emerge in Spain following the end of the civil war. Nada won the Premio Nadal in 1944 and, along with Camilo José Cela’s 1942 novel La familia de Pascual Duarte, was considered to have been integral to the regeneration of Spanish culture following the war. From here onwards La isla y los demonios will be abbreviated to La isla.
5. Socio-historic interpretations of post-war Spanish fiction remain dominant within academic research, thus blinding our knowledge to some of broader psychological and philosophical meanings that can be found in texts of this epoch.
6. I am not suggesting the consequences of the severance of a love relationship but the psychological state of being in love.


10. In this regard, the detailed psychological insights provided by writers’ treatment of character are not so far removed from psychoanalysts’ case studies. Freud himself acknowledged the importance of literature in providing fertile ground for psychoanalytical inquiry.

11. Both Nada and La isla are not lacking in autobiographical references to Laforet’s life. She lost her mother when she was thirteen years old and was dominated by the neurotic obsessions of her step-mother who, to a large extent, is reflected in the character of Pino in La isla. Throughout Laforet’s novels, relationships within the family are represented as dysfunctional, violent and devoid of affection. Thus, it is the family, rather than wider society per se that functions as the main harbinger of traumatic experience.

12. Langford, 111.

13. Langford, 111.

14. Langford, 143.

15. Comparisons may be drawn here with Freud’s discussion of the ‘oceanic feeling.’

16. ‘She felt once again her love for Pablo filling her up like water in a pond, overflowing and oppressing her.’ La isla, 290. All translations are my own.


20. ‘Never, she thought, could she love another person in this way. It’s not possible for such an immense feeling, with no grounding in reality, to be granted twice in a lifetime.’ La isla, 290.
21. ‘The atmosphere in the room filled her and calmed her completely. She lost all notion of time.’ La isla, 112.

22. ‘Her state of mind was full of fervour, as if she were in church.’ La isla, 111.

23. ‘If she could only, in some way, help him to be less alone, she would consider herself happy to have been born and raised on the island, waiting there for him.’ La isla, 112.

24. By the end of the novel readers discover that Pablo is entirely self-seeking and ordinary. Marta discovers him fondling her aunt Honesta in the garden of her house, although his sexual desire for her aunt is revealed earlier on in the novel through his drawings.

25. Marta’s surname is camino which translates as path and symbolises her journey towards greater self-awareness and the diminishing grip that love has on her psyche as the novel develops.

26. Laforet was not a prolific writer. She published five novels and several collections of short stories as well as a travelogue of a journey to the United States and a substantial number of articles for Spanish cultural magazines.

27. Laforet’s third novel, La mujer nueva could be deemed an exception to this view. While the protagonist returns to her husband at the end of the novel, interpretations of her motivations and actions must remain ambiguous as it is not clear whether Paulina’s freedom has been compromised.

28. ‘Get used to the idea that you must not pursue someone who rejects you...under no circumstances.’ La isla, 156.

29. Langford, 150.

30. ‘Her desire to write was so strong that it enveloped her in a warm wave of enthusiasm.’ La isla, 18, 30.

31. This is presented as an ongoing dialectic that encourages Marta to self-reflect within the temporal framework of the narrated events, whereas in Nada it is only Andrea the older narrator who appears to have experienced some reflective insight into her younger self. Despite being older, Andrea is at a more immature stage of psychological development than Marta as she is not equipped with the necessary insights to understand her use of art, music and aesthetic contemplation as a defence mechanism against her primary trauma. Marta on the other hand becomes aware of her other, more rational self, as the novel develops, which in turn enables her
to act to leave the island, although she vacillates even when her conviction appears firm towards the end of the novel.

32. ‘The plaza had started coming to life. Women farm workers had just arrived on the daily bus, early morning servants were busying themselves there. She looked at them. From time to time she thought: “It is I, I, Marta Camino, who is free on this day.”’ La isla, 125.

33. The character of Pino in the novel provides a good example of this phenomenon.

34. Langford, xi.

35. ‘It’s asking for reality,’ La isla, 128.

36. ‘A woman’s life is love and reality. Love, reality, the beating of blood. [...] Within you, you carry the seeds of many children still to be born.’ La isla, 130.

37. ‘A person who flees must know how to resolve her own affairs and take risks.’ La isla, 191.


40. Carmen Laforet, Al volver la esquina (Barcelona: Destino, 2004).

41. Westkott, 146.


43. Horney, Our Inner Conflicts, 233.

44. Freud, ‘Femininity,’ 234.